

Culture and Equity Across Time

In fifth grade, I flew over the Pacific Ocean and watched all that I thought I knew transform before my eyes. My family had taken a vacation in the Philippines to see relatives, but I discovered another world. Although I was young, my experiences in the foreign country lingered in my mind for many years to come. The ghost of this developing nation haunted me when I returned home, unable to forget the conditions that some people had to endure.

Before the trip, I would shamelessly complain about the halo of sweat that would line my forehead after I walked to school, the shade of my shirt, or the flavor of my annual birthday cake. After, though, a blade of guilt would strike whenever I was ungrateful for all that I had. In the Philippines, I saw what it truly meant to be poor. When I witnessed a couple and their children all seated upon a single motorcycle, I chuckled. Maybe it was because I was naïve and ignorant then, but I now realize that it was wrong to fault and mock the deficit they faced. Shacks of sheet metal and palm fronds lined the streets, and I now wonder if they lived in one.

Peering out the window of my grandmother's childhood home, I noticed multiple figures, clad in swimsuits, hosing themselves down in a blue plastic pool. At first I assumed that they were playing, but then I noticed that they were passing a single soap bar around—that was what they considered a shower. It was absurd to think that I had whined about water pressure whilst they bathed on the side of a busy road with only the soaked cloth that clung to their skin for privacy.

Another encounter, however, was what fully immersed me in the severity of poverty. During a party, my uncle, also visiting from America, would throw 1000 Philippine peso bills around, and whoever caught it got to keep it. This only converts to about 20 US dollars, and yet almost every person in that room was eagerly watching, astounded at how casually he would discard such large amounts of money. Encouraged by his actions, I asked one of my younger cousins if she wanted a few of the silver pesos sitting idly in my wallet. To my astonishment, her eyes grew nearly as large as the coins as she rushed to show her parents. It was only worth a couple of cents to me, but to her it was the equivalent of a king's riches.

The trip enlightened me, displaying the depths of destitution so explicitly that it became unforgettable. Life is a game of chance—before birth the dice are rolled, and luck toys with fate. Those who chance favors are given a life where they can thrive, but others are thwarted by possibility's letdowns. The truth is that many people are undeserving of what they have; simultaneously, there are some who deserve more than what the odds grant them. To my chagrin, it took an international vacation to understand the importance of gratitude and to see just how lucky I am.

Whenever I grow angry with a first-world problem, I remember the faces of children who have so much less, purely because they were born into a perpetual cycle of poverty.